Decolonizing Sikh Studies: A Feminist Manifesto

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In celebrating the epistemological reform and empowerment of non-white peoples in the academy, we propose a manifesto that seeks to dislodge the complacencies within Sikh Studies and within Sikh communities, and invite non-Sikhs to engage with radical Sikhi social justice. By dwelling at feminist intersections of postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, and decolonization studies, we are inspired to share the radical possibilities of Sikh Studies, and we also urge Sikh Studies and Sikh people to inhabit an explicit political orientation of insurrection and subversion. Importantly, such a feminist decolonial orientation may well hold promise for other fields of study on the margins as well. In particular, we foreground eight points of action: gendering Sikh Studies; de-policing intimate desire and the diversity of relationships; disrupting Eurocentric knowledge production; de-territorializing diasporas; challenging caste politics; disrupting Islamophobia; undoing our roles in contemporary colonialisms; and fostering care and responsibility for the nonhuman world. In this manifesto we hope to develop interdisciplinary connections, critical interventions, and broader alliances to cultivate debates and action that both challenge tradition and participate within broader political campaigns for social justice.

Key words: Sikh; Sikh Studies; feminism; political change; decolonizing; alliances; social justice

We, Katy and Rita, first met at a Sikh Studies workshop in 2011, and have been inspired to write this manifesto to prompt a community-wide conversation among Sikhs, especially scholars in Sikh Studies, and to share the radical possibilities of Sikhism with non-Sikh political actors who seek structural justice. Sikhism, or *Sikhi* as it is also called, is often described as a monotheistic religion founded in the 1500s, in northern India, by Guru Nanak Dev-ji, the first Sikh Guru. He was followed by nine successive human Gurus (divine messengers) and the sacred scripture *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, whose *Gurmat* (the counsel of the Gurus) is followed by some thirty million people today. Some of the values often cited about Sikhism include a belief in sex equality, living a full life aware of the divine within us, a rejection of caste, and an active and strong commitment to service to humanity and the world, underpinned by spirituality. We approach Sikhi as a way to see the world and learn by centering the interconnectedness of all things; as Sikhnet states, the Punjabi word *Sikhi* means learner or disciple and represents a process of self-transformation.[1] Sikh Studies as an academic discipline emerged in the 1960s and became institutionalized in the humanities in the USA and to a lesser extent western Europe.[2] The emergence of a distinct and coherent field of Sikh Studies can be traced back to the development of area studies and a central paradigm for organizing the study of non-western cultures in the university system, as well as the growth of religious studies as a secular discipline.[3]

We were excited to attend the 2011 academic gathering with other people from "our" Sikh community. At the workshop, we instantly connected as two Sikh (cis)women and feminists engaged with questions of the political rather than that just of the religious or anthropological, with a particular focus on projects of anti-racism and anti-colonialism. On the personal level, we

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were also well aware that though we were not all that versed in our religious texts, and though we cut our hair—according to the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh Ji (1666-1708), the tenth Guru/teacher of Sikhi, devout Sikhs who follow the faith are meant to keep their hair because it channels spiritual energy—we were still deeply committed to engaging with Sikhi, even if we felt slightly on the outside.[4] As our friendship developed, it became clear to us that while we celebrated the epistemological reform and empowerment of non-white peoples in the academy that arose from Sikh Studies in Anglo-American contexts, there were reasons to pause and reflect on this body of work.

First, while such works can be seen to have made a contribution to research on Sikhs by arousing scholarly interest and public debate, some are also central in generating essentializing and Orientalizing discourses, which established notions that various schemas or classification systems could be simply developed and applied to understand Sikh *being*.[5] Despite the establishment of Sikh Studies Chairs held by Sikhs, the main problem around conventional Sikh Studies in the west is that the knowledge produced primarily represents Sikhs through a western gaze, whereby mainly western insights and "expertise" are deployed to interpret religious customs, texts, and practices (Sian 2013: 12, 22). Through such a process we have been left with dominant articulations of Sikhs as a "fixed" category rather than as political subjects, and although contemporary Sikh scholarship has sought to challenge these essentialist framings, it remains on the margins in the field. This pattern has plagued most non-western religious, cultural, and ethnic groups whereby European anthropological works have focused their analysis on what these collectives "should" be like by adopting racializing tropes of caste, honor, and kinship as measures of comparison against a western, colonial model of development.[6] The production of such knowledge formations has unsurprisingly infiltrated Sikh Studies, whereby various academic works have continued to reproduce these colonial logics and institutionalizing processes of identity. Sikh Studies can as such be seen as being closely bound up with a particular version of Orientalism: on the one hand, Sikh subjectivity, experiences, and agency are scripted through a reductive negative west/non-west binary by which the west negatively defines itself, and on the other, martial Sikh masculinty that has been entrenched in colonial discourse (including the imperial idea that Sikhs were well-built for fighting) is valorized. Moreover, this western gaze has been incorporated by members of Sikh communities (as well as the Indian state and other South Asians), producing "auto-Orientalism."[7] For the purposes of this paper, we are interested in developing resistance to Orientalist and auto-Orientialist Sikh Studies and hegemonic representations of Sikhs that are being inadvertedly or deliberately conjured.

Secondly, in the western academy, Sikh Studies has become dominated by Sikh turbaned men (for example, at the time of writing, five of six endowed Sikh Studies Chairs in the US and Canada are Sikh turbaned men) or by white scholars—all from a range of disciplines including music, religious studies, anthropology, global and/or migration studies, and history. Of course in principle we have no objection to Sikh turbaned men leading Sikh Studies, except that, in practice, they have come to represent the archetypical Sikh subject to the exclusion of others, such as turbaned Sikh women, Sikh women in general, lesbian/gay/bisexual/nonbinary gender/transgender Sikhs who are "out," and disabled Sikhs. Nor do we object in principle to the work done by non-Sikh scholars or by *Gora* (white) Sikhs, but in political practice white supremacy has structured world history; as such, white positionality and white ideology are not innocent systems of rule and control, and bring particular epistemological orientations to the exclusion of other epistemologies.

Third, within current contexts of fascism, the rise of the far right, white supremacy, neoliberal accumulation and extraction, colonial dispossession, and heteropatriarchy across the globe, there is an urgent need to respond and collectively mobilize. Sikh Studies has the potential to be a catalyst of radical political transformation. In our attempt to dislodge the complacencies

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of Sikh Studies and the current institutionalization of hegemonic knowledge productions that continue to haunt Sikh communities, we aim to open up alternative ways of thinking through the lens of decolonial Sikh feminisms.

Ours is both an intellectual and practical project that calls for renewed Sikh scholarship and activity and that centers the voices of marginal groups within Sikh communities and beyond (i.e., women, LGBTQIA groups, non-Punjabi Sikhs, other racially marked/colonized groups). Through this manifesto we hope to develop interdisciplinary connections, critical interventions, and broader alliances and to cultivate debates and action that challenge tradition and participate in broader political campaigns for social justice; such a project questions the epistemological habits of a marginalized field of study (as has been the case with other disciplines, such as Black studies, Indigenous studies, feminist studies, and queer studies). This working, living manifesto is not about public admonishments but a critical intervention directed at fostering radical relations attuned to critiques of rule and control that produce injustices, whether targeting Sikhs or others. By a living manifesto, we mean that this is not a fixed blueprint with a singular endpoint or finalized prescription of how to live a life aligned with Sikhi, but instead a set of values that we as Sikh feminists see as important, that will shift according to place and time, and that serves as an opening for thoughtful political conversation about the work of Sikh Studies. Our intervention is informed by our particular socio-political locations.

1 Grounded Self-Locations

Katy

I was born in Britain. Both my parents are Sikh. My mother was born in Kenya and my father was born in Uganda. They moved to Britain in the 1960s and had an arranged marriage. They divorced in the early 2000s, and I have not seen my father since. Generally we grew up as a somewhat assimilated family—my name, Katy, is clearly anglicized, as are both my sisters' names. Part of this I understand as a coping mechanism for my parents, trying to protect their children from racism in Britain; the other part I suspect was the internalization of colonial logics, whereby resistance to assimilation was deemed disruptive. I wouldn't say my upbringing was particularly strict, like the textbooks like to tell us; my Punjabi is regretfully very poor, and I was brought up in a white, affluent neighborhood. Since my parents divorced, and even prior to the divorce, I'd say we have been a matriarchal family. My mother had very little education so made education a priority for us girls. We went (and still go) to Gurdwara (Sikh temple) fairly regularly. My granddad wore his turban proudly, and my grandma remains a strict vegan. I certainly have a strong sense of family connection, always aware of my roots, history, and heritage.

I wasn't brought up actually knowing about caste politics. As a family we just identified as Sikhs. I learned a lot later that we were Ramgarhias, but were raised to challenge caste-based hierarchies. There was no direct involvement with formalized Sikh politics in my family; however, when my granddad moved over to the UK he supported the local Sikh community and Gurdwara. I am the "lightest-skinned" of my sisters, and this has always brought with it a strange set of configurations. Growing up I learned that "fair" skin was to be celebrated, and from quite a young age it was already clear to see how deeply rooted colonized ideas remained in the community. Being racially ambiguous, both in my community and the national majority, revealed the tensions around difference and otherness. Because of my name and appearance, Sikhs were unable to place me as Sikh; similarly members of the national majority have placed me as white, European, Middle Eastern, East Asian, or mixed. My difference and otherness has therefore been highly exoticized; I have often been regarded as someone who is just the right amount of

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"ethnic," which has enabled me to some degree to "pass" racial lines superficially, but never structurally.[8]

My ongoing commitment to anti-racism really stemmed from my PhD experience, which gave me the tools to critically navigate forms of colonial injustice. My defining research came through my original analysis of Sikh and Muslim conflict. This work sought to critique hegemonic forms of Sikhness that historically and presently cast an Islamophobic figure of the Muslim "enemy." The work called for a destabilizing of Islamophobia within the Sikh community, and a broader call for decolonization, that is, for an identity that is not dependent upon past, deep-seated, colonial affiliations. To my surprise, this research has generated plenty of debate within Britain and other diasporic Sikh communities. In the context of Britain there has been sustained opposition from various far-right Sikh groups, mainly comprised of males, who have for over a decade sought to undermine my work, harass me, and insult me, claiming that I am an Islamophile, that I have converted to Islam, that I am not Sikh, that I am sexually promiscuous, and that I have caused damage to the community. This backlash has made it explicitly clear to me that there remains a deep strand of Islamophobic misogyny that runs through some sections of the Sikh community, and Sikh scholarship therefore has a responsibility to deepen its critique and develop inclusive, alternative narratives.

Rita

My full name is Rita Kaur Baljit Pardesi Dhamoon. I was named after Reita Faria, the first Asian woman to win the Miss World contest (in 1966); I am not sure whether to be embarrassed or proud of this fact. Kaur is one of the signifiers of all Sikhs—given by Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Sikh Guru. Baljit means a nice girl that makes everything around her shimmer and shine; I am not sure I am nice, shimmery, or shiny. Pardesi: I wonder why my parents gave this name only to me among their five children. Pardesi has come to represent either "the foreigner" or anyone who lives away; I have always connected to the word *desh* (homeland/country), and while I was born and raised in the UK, I *feel* my ancestors. And Dhamoon: Dhamoon is the anglicized version of *Daman*, which the British border official that processed by dad's arrival in the UK could not spell, so he made up a spelling. Not an unusual story.

My family is from Amritsar Punjab, India. This is a place where my great grandfather was hanged by the British for his anticolonial radicalism in the 1920s alongside four other Sikh men; where (we think) he was detained in a prison for several months before being hanged; where my great grandmother was then forced to move back to her paternal *pend* (village) with her children; where both grandfathers fought against British rule and lived through the partition of India and Pakistan; where my paternal grandfather witnessed the horrors of the 1984 invasion of the *Sri Harmindar Sahib* (the main Sikh temple) by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's army, followed by her assassination by one of her guards who was Sikh, as well as the state-led pograms that led to the deaths of an estimated 3500 Sikh men and boys across India; and where my parents grew up in poverty, mere streets away from one another, not knowing one another, only to have their marriage arranged by relatives in the UK.

I was born in the UK, and lived there until I was 23. I remember very clearly becoming politicized during the years of bearing witness to masculine violence in our families. Then there were numerous racist attacks on my mother and brothers by white supremacists, including a member of the National Front; I recall watching events unfold during the 1984-1985 miners' strike as unions and families were made to break under Thatcher's Britain; and I joined anti-racist protests following the 1993 stabbing of an 18-year-old Black male, Stephen Lawrence, in an unprovoked attack by a gang of white youths as he waited at a bus stop in Eltham, south-east London, with his friend Duwayne Brooks.

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Politically, I was "black" in 1970s and 1980s England. But my move to Canada in 1993 shifted my label to the apolitical "visible minority" and the more political terms of woman of color, anti-racist feminist, and nonwhite person. Over the years, my class status became more pronounced to me as I transitioned from being economically working class to middle class (especially when I completed my PhD), and from being a new immigrant to a permanent resident then a citizen during a time that refugees were being increasingly immobilized and detained. By a few degrees of separation and isolation, I am connected to various Sikh communities in Canada, particularly through my parents' commitment to religious practice, my interest in our family history, and my research focus on Sikhs. And, to settle in Canada, first on the traditional territories of Ojibway-Anishnabe, then Musqueam and Qay'qayt First Nations, and now Songhees, Esquimalt, and Lekwungen territories is, for me, linked to the global colonial context in which the British planted themselves, including in partitioned India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

2 Grounded Theories

Our manifesto is grounded in *grassroots feminist praxis* that dwells at the *intersections of postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, and decolonization studies*, and draws on teachings of *Sikhi*. In invoking feminism, we i) pay particular attention to power relations that operationalize discourses of patriarchy, gender, heterosexuality, and homophobia, and ii) seek to disrupt interacting relations of rule and control through gendered capitalism-racialization-colonization-heteronormativity-transphobia-disablesm. As Hundle says about Sikh feminism, we are interested in confronting patriarchal nationalist projects and state violences, as well as communal and domestic patriarchies.[9] This includes interrogating our relationships of privilege as well as oppression, and drawing on decolonial knowledge such as the very bestowal of Guruship authority to *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, the holy Sikh scriptures, rather than through the male lineage.[10]

Postcolonial, decolonial, and decolonization studies certainly share affinities, including some of the same canon (e.g., Frantz Fanon, Maria Lugones), interventions into and against western and white supremacist knowledge, and the unmaking of universalities. But each field also presents particular interventions which cannot be reduced to one another. *Postcolonial studies*, as a loosely defined interdisciplinary set of theories and methods that emerged largely from the contexts of ex-colonies, especially in South Asia, tends to deconstruct colonial discourses, thought patterns, and forms of representation. *Decolonial studies* is an emerging Latin American movement that proposes that the coloniality of power did not end with the end of formal colonialism, but is the basis of current power structures, directly bolstering the international division of labor[11] as well as processes of gendering.[12] While postcolonial studies seeks to add to and change existing forms of knowledge production, decolonial studies comes "from without"; in Mignolo's conceptualization, decoloniality is about changing the terms of the conversation and not only the contents.[13] It requires epistemic disobedience and de-linking from the status quo as a precursor to civil disobedience. *Decolonization studies* references postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, but it also signals a distinctive body of work and political project led by Indigenous scholars who see it as a verb rather than a noun, which is fundamentally about life settled on Indigenous lands by non-Indigenous peoples. In the words of Tuck and Yang, decolonization is not a metaphor but centrally about undoing state control over Indigenous land bases.[14]

While we accept that there may well be an incommensurability between the projects of postcolonialism, decoloniality, and decolonization, we propose that together all three can be productively discordant to mitigate the conservative and disciplinary impulses of fields of

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knowledge on the margins, such as Sikh Studies. To be clear, ours is not a project about assessing which approach is better (postcolonialism versus decoloniality versus decolonization); rather, here, we offer political interventions that are informed by these as interacting ways of knowing and being. For the sake of brevity, we refer to this as a decolonial feminist Sikh framework. Because we inflect our approach with Sikhi, we specifically emphasize the decolonial aspect. As Shackle and Mandair (2005) note, *Sikhi*, the process of ego-loss, is the fundamental principle of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* and runs through all of its key themes: (i) one(ness), (ii) time and contingency, (iii) mind (*satguru*/ego), and (iv) itness/love/non-knowledge. "Sikh concepts, ideas and practices," states Hundle, "can be mined and sourced for their potential" (Hundle 2017: 238). Indeed, we are inspired by the first words of the Sikh scripture, *Ek Onkar*, which is interpreted in various ways but which we take to mean Oneness with Creation or Everything, and thus with the self, each other, and all life in the universe. This oneness is not singular or universalizing, but unique flowing energy that moves and resides in everything and connects us. It is this interconnectedness that propels our manifesto. By dwelling at feminist intersections of postcolonial, decolonial, and decolonization studies, we urge Sikh Studies and also Sikh people to inhabit an explicit political orientation of insurrection and subversion. Importantly, such a feminist decolonial orientation may well hold promise for other fields of study and groups on the margins as well.

3 A Sikh Feminist Decolonial Manifesto

Gendering Sikh Studies

Sikhi is rooted in principles of equity (Singh 2005), whereby the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanakj Dev-ji's (1469-1539), commitment to gender equality is often cited to remind us that the physical male and female body is temporary, and that our spiritual higher beings are connected to the Gurus. Guru Angad Dev-ji (1504-1552), the second Guru, advocated for the education of all women; Guru Amar Das-ji (1479-1574), the third Guru, condemned sati, purdah (the covering of the face), and female infanticide; and by the time of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh-ji (1666-1708), 40% of Sikh missionaries were women. Like all societies, however, egalitarian commitments do not always translate into reality. Global Sikh communities do not commonly practice the key tenet of gender equality—which includes all genders—that is enshrined in Sikhism.[15] Like all subjects, Sikh women both historically and presently continue to be constrained by patriarchal structures that attempt to police their bodies.[16]

Conventionally in Sikh discourse, Sikh women have been located on the margins, represented through the Sikh male gaze; as Jackobsh argues, "the overwhelming impression one receives from Sikh historiography is that Sikh women do not *have* a history. From the silences surrounding women, their experiences and lives can only be perceived as inconsequential."[17] While critical scholarly work has indeed been developed on Sikh feminisms, which engages with postcolonial, Black, and third world traditions of feminist praxis (Hundle 2017), this research remains on the "outside" of mainstream Sikh Studies. Key themes that have been particularly overlooked in Sikh Studies include sexual abuse, domestic violence, and gender inequality (Behl 2019). Considering that so many South Asian women under-report domestic abuse,[18] Sikh Studies has a responsibility to center these debates and voices to facilitate conversations and interventions that have been absent or sidelined for too long. We also want to avoid deploying problematic notions such as *izzat* (honour) to account for these processes, which work to reproduce earlier culturally deterministic frameworks.

Our feminist decolonial praxis adopts a more critical epistemological approach that locates the lived and embodied experiences of Sikh women beyond constraining narratives generated on the one hand by western discourse and on the other by sexist Sikh discourse. Our

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manifesto also does not assume Sikh women are a monolithic group or fixed culturally in time or place.[19] Whilst we recognize patriarchy is a feature of most societies, we believe that it is of critical importance to engage with the specificities of Sikh trajectories if we are to successfully challenge gendered forms of violence and oppression. The fundamental concern for our approach to Sikh studies (as an ethical, intellectual, and practical project) is to document, disrupt, and dislocate gender hierarchies that violently exclude Sikh women and non-binary genders, both analytically and in actuality. Here, we can draw from Sikhi: for example, while binarized understandings of Kaur-as-female and Singh-as-male dominate Sikh practices, "a non-normative interpretation is that Kaur and Singh are fluid identities and their affixation to a gender binary is arbitrary […] Nowhere in the writings on Khalsa attributed to Guru Gobind Singh is the entity of Khalsa ascribed a gender" (Kaur 2017: 241).[20] Indeed, in some practices of Khalsa identity, gendered aesthetic binaries are transgressed, with all genders wearing turbans, growing their body and facial hair, and wearing similar kurta dress (Khalsa 2017: 247-48).

De-Policing Intimate Desire/Diversity of Relations

As in all societies, intimate desire comes under scrutiny for various reasons. In this section we address two aspects of intimate and sexual desire: opposite sex and queer relations, and interfaith marriages. While some, such as Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti of the Akal Takht, have condemned homosexuality, Sarbat LGBT Sikhs in the UK note that despite various practices of heteronormativity, the Sikh marriage ceremony, *Lavaan*—composed by Guru Ram Das-ji (1534-1581), the fourth Guru—is actually between two souls, and souls are genderless in Sikhi: "The only references made to gender are of the two human souls of the people entering the marriage as being the bride and God being the bridegroom. The use of gender within the Lavaan is metaphorical."[21] Sarbat LGBT Sikhs (2019: n.p.) go on to to note that the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* (the Sikh holy scripture) is silent on same-sex sexual behaviour, and that there is nothing stating that marriage must be between a cis-man and cis-woman.

Yet, as we consistently witness, Sikh communities claim that LGBTQIA issues are not the issues of "our community," falsely implying that all Sikhs are heterosexual. This is reflected in the fact that leading scholarly journals on Sikhs have only a handful of published articles directly on topics affecting Sikh LGBTQIA peoples. We urge Sikh Studies and Sikhs to follow the lead of Sacremento Sikh Temple, which, after the murders of two Sikhs in Elk Grove in March 2014, condemned a hate crime and offered a reward for information leading to the arrest of the perpretator of a violent anti-gay attack in the same neighbourhood.[22] We also urge Sikh communities to actively engage in anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia practices; for example, Manjinder Singh Sidhu, a gay Sikh activist who contributed to a school toolkit on faith and LGBT children, has created a YouTube video with his "traditional" mother on how and why Sikhs should support LGBT children.

A second area of intimate desire that is central to our manifesto is to stop the practice that prevents Sikhs marrying people from other faiths by the *Anand Karaj* ceremony, the Sikh wedding ritual. Contrary to the idea of welcoming everyone to *sangat* (the congregation), some Sikhs have taken to stopping interfaith and interracial marriages involving Sikhs, especially if the female is Sikh and the groom is Black and/or Muslim. The claim is that only Sikhs can be married in a Gurdwara. The freedom for Sikhs to marry, partner with, and engage in sexual relations with whomever they want without fear of violence, forced marriage, or being outcasted should be protected.[23] Our argument is that interfaith and interracial partnerships and marriages are not a good in and of themselves, but they are markers of choice about the body and sexuality, and they can open the opportunity to educate communities on how struggles of justice are interconnected and related.

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Disrupting Eurocentric Knowledge Production

Much of the academic and popular literature on South Asians in the west has been centered upon a set of narrow, reductive, Orientalist (mis)representations. These accounts have persistently subjected brown bodies to the western gaze, whereby general practices of the community are turned into a marker of cultural specificity. Attention has focused particularly upon ideas of "oppressive households," "insular family units," and "kinship systems."[24] Sociological, political, and popular representations of "passive" South Asian women remain hegemonic and bound up with contemporary debates on forced marriages, runaway girls, and honor killings. Ballard and Ballard are guilty of reproducing the dominant paradigm of the "culture clash thesis,"[25] which refers to the simplistic notion of an innate "tension" between young Asians wanting to enjoy the westernized lifestyle while being restricted by family and communal authority from doing so.[26] This framework has become routinized in the narration of South Asian identities, particularly in western mainstream popular culture (e.g., in films such as *East is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*). The "culture clash" has been deployed over decades to account for an "identity crisis" that is assumed to afflict young South Asian populations (Sian 2013: 45-6). Youthful rebellion, independence, and a sense of individuality are all natural manifestations of adolescence, but are read as a particular "cultural rebellion" against "traditional" values only when concerning racialized subjects (Sian 2013; Ahmad 2006).

Like Ballard and Ballard, James' account on Sikh youth in Britain also presents a set of reductive, sensationalist, Orientalist descriptions, focused on "family shame" and "honor":

> A father who warned his daughter when she went to college that, if she dragged his name in the dirt, he would kill her first and then kill himself, was probably not exaggerating. While physical punishment and cruelty are not common, when family honour and everything a Sikh believes in seem to be threatened, the reaction may be very violent.[27]

While these academic accounts are largely dated, they have continued to shape common understandings of South Asian communities in the social sciences and popular culture. Such analyses remain locked within what S. Sayyid describes as the *immigrant imaginary*—that is, a set of Orientalist representations marking the divide between host and immigrant.[28] In such a framework, non-western experiences are read as apolitical/passive, and described through racializing formations of ethnicity, culture, and biology.

To decolonize Sikh studies effectively, it is precisely these discourses that need to be rejected and challenged for their inherent racism and Orientalism. These essentialist accounts reinforce the division between the "traditional" and the "modern," homogenous culture, and rely upon colonial discourses of western superiority (Ahmad 2006: 282). They also imply that the antidote to cure the woes seen to be afflicting South Asian communities comes by embracing so-called modern western values of individualism, progress, secularism, gender equality, and industriousness—as if these are intrinsically superior and non-existent in non-western cultures; particularly, it is often suggested that white feminism will (apparently) "save" brown women from our (apparently) "dangerous" brown men.[29] A decolonial Sikh Studies must commit itself to aligning itself with postcolonial feminisms, Asian feminisms, Indigenous feminisms, Black feminisms, and Latinx feminisms that critique reductive analysis and develop instead tools to narrate our own histories and our futures outside a Eurocentric framework. By disrupting Eurocentric knowledge productions, and centering our lived experiences, a decolonizing Sikh Studies is that which actively steps out of the western gaze and generates alternative knowledge formations that recognize Sikhs as agents of their own scripts.

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De-Territorializing Diasporas

While the overall majority of Sikhs are from the Punjab, the all too-easy conflation of Sikhness with Punjabiness is one that we challenge. Some Sikhs have long fought for a separatist Sikh state (Khalistan) in Punjab, and although these campaigns and movements failed, the Punjab still represents for many a sacred site that is home to *Sri Harmandir Sahib* (the Golden Temple). In particular, the events of 1984—when the holy site of Harmandir Sahib was attacked by the Indian government and when some Sikhs adopted a distinctly anti-Congress Party and anti-Hindu politic—would come to reinforce this reading.[30] The Punjab has thus played a central role in the defining of the Sikh imaginary, often signifying what might be described as a homeland.[31] As Smith suggests, the homeland can be seen as that which is "felt by the community to belong to it," both in a physical and symbolic sense.[32]

While undoubtedly Punjab connects Sikhs worldwide, the insistence on the notion of a Punjabi homeland as a defining feature of Sikhness cannot account for non-Punjabi Sikhs (such as *Gora* Sikhs, Sindhi Sikhs, and other diasporic Sikhs). The focus on Punjabiness also reduces Sikhs to being merely a product of a territory, whereby the territory comes to totalize the people culturally, spiritually, and linguistically. While Punjabi is the common language for many Sikhs, it is not exclusive to Sikhs, as Punjabi Hindus and Punjabi Muslims, for example, can also share this language, culure, and connection to place (on India and Pakistan side). Furthermore, *Gora* (white) converts to Sikhism or Sikhs born outside the Punjab would not necessarily share the "exclusivity" of this language. Following postcolonial insights, the essentialist reading of Sikhness through the lens of Punjabiness therefore does not allow for the possibility of those Sikhs who cannot be said to belong to the same descent group as Punjabi Sikhs. In other words, it fails to account for the diversity of the Sikh collective and the rich set of differences it entails beyond Punjab.

While we do not deny the importance of Punjab for the Sikh community, rather than understanding Sikhs in conventional accounts of diaspora, that is, as a community in exile awaiting the return to their ancestral homeland, we prefer to understand the Sikh diasporic experience as that which transcends state-based formations of nationhood (Sayyid 2014: 99-116). In Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*[33] precisely the same argument is made, in that while the Black subject is able to trace its beginnings from Africa (West Africa specifically), it cannot at the same time be reduced to its African past or a homogenizing idea of Africa. In Sayyid's reconceptualization of diaspora as "anti-nation," the global Muslim diaspora *(ummah)* rejects or, at the very least, undermines the idea of nation.[34] It does this through the presence or articulation of a specific Muslim subjectivity, whereby loyalties, attachments, and belongings surpass the narrow confinements of the nation in which Muslims may find themselves, both as a minority (e.g., UK, Australia, Canada) and as a majority (e.g., Pakistan, Iran, Turkey). In other words, the globalized, stateless structure of the *ummah* means that Muslims worldwide are unified primarily by Islam (Sayyid 2014: 115). Such a reading of the Muslim diaspora (or the *ummah*) is less focused on the return to a particular homeland, and more concerned with the articulation of a common political identity on its own terms, which transcends borders.

We argue for a similar recognition and embracing of the diasporic status of Sikhs beyond nation, both because there are large Sikh communities outside the Punjab, some who claim national belonging elsewhere as British-Sikhs, American Sikhs, etc., and because even in the Punjab, Sikhs are "homeless" because they are stateless.[35] The Sikh diaspora here is not understood as simply an empirical entity, but rather that which represents a fluid deterroritalized sense of identities in which the Punjab may or may not be central; indeed, in exploring heterogenous Sikh female subjectivities in the East African context, Brah notes that the desire for "home" in the diaspora should not be confused with a desire for a "homeland" (Brah 2005:

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161). What we are calling for is the formation of collective identities that are articulated outside of conventional western templates of nationalism that are typically rooted in frames of empire-states or nation-states, because they are characteristically exclusionary, are territorially bound, and privilege constructions of race.[36] Such a reading allows all those who identify as Sikh to participate within a global conversation determining the contours of what it means to be a Sikh without the privileging of a Punjabi or Indian identity.

Challenging Caste Politics

During the emergence of Sikhi, Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji sought to establish a separate Sikh identity through the rejection of Varna (caste-system), which defined much of Hindu politics at the time. Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji opposed the caste system that divided people according to norms of ritual purity and hierarchies of social status. Sikhs are all given the name of Singh or Kaur, as a way to refuse caste discrimination. Sikhi was thus articulated as a way of life based on liberation and emancipation, free from caste-based alignments. The most notable example of this in practice was the institutionalization of the *langar* (dining) hall, which was established to serve free food to all at the same level (floor level), regardless of position, religion, class, gender, and ethnicity. Unsurprisingly then, Sikhi appealed to many dalits and those deemed "lower" castes, who converted to the religion as a way to improve their life experiences.[37] However, due to competing economic and political interests at both the local and regional level, this was soon to be undermined, and Sikhs developed their own caste hierarchies; as Puri argues, this was especially the case because of varied practices of implementing religious principles and tribal cultural patterns of the dominant caste of *Jats* and their power interests (Puri 2003: 2693).

Social status became increasingly defined by ownership of land, in which Sikh *Jats* ("agrarian" caste) were constructed as a "dominant" caste. Other "dominant" castes include *Khatris* ("mercantile" caste) and *Ramgarhias* ("artisan" caste). So-called *Chamars* (a pejorative word for the "service" caste) are constructed as the "lower" castes or "outcastes."[38] These divisions were further intensified by the British under colonial rule, who organized Sikhs around "a new conception of 'merit' attached to the class/caste owning large landed property, belonging to military (martial race) strata and 'pride' of unflinching loyalty to the British" (Puri 2003: 2696). *Jats* were favored by the British for their loyalty towards and service within the Indian Army, and their designation as a "special class" became internalized as the image of the *Jat* as a "deserving" and "dominant caste" was cemented in Sikh culture; this remains intact today (Puri 2003: 2695). As Ram (2007: 4040) notes, dominant Sikh *Jats* in Punjab today are able to exercise relative power and control over land, religion, and politics in the state.

Caste systems continue to play an important role across the global Sikh community (Puri 2003; Ram 2007). For example, inter-caste marriages are often frowned upon both in India and throughout the diaspora, and in some instances "lower" castes are made to sit separately in Gurdwaras. Furthermore, the vast majority of Gurdwaras worldwide are caste-based as signified in their names and titles. These practices demonstrate an undermining of the founding egalitarian principles of Sikhi, which emerged as a direct challenge to discriminatory caste-based politics and which grew as a religion of the dispossessed and plebeians. By continuing to subscribe to notions of caste, social differences are legitimized throughout the Sikh collective.[39] A decolonial Sikh Studies must therefore actively reject caste-based affiliations and commit itself to critiquing the processes of social marginalization that caste systems incur. Furthermore, it must show solidarity with all those in society who have been assigned a lower status by dominant groups, leading to caste and related class differentials; this includes solidarity with Mazhabi Sikhs and Ravidasia Sikhs who are assigned lower status by dominant Sikhs, so-called "Chuhras" and "Chamars" (prejorative terms for Dalits), Dalit (many who, in Punjab, are Sikh) and Bahujan peoples who

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are caste-oppressed communities, the more than 200 Adivasis/Indigenous tribes across India who face dispossession and economic exploitation, Sheedis (African-Asians who are ancestors of Africans forcibly taken as slaves during the fifteenth century and nineteenth century as well as those who went voluntarily) who face anti-Black casteism, and other nonwhites and working classes. We specifically call for a Sikh Studies that dismantles caste structures by consciously and ethically working towards restoring an inclusive discourse that takes seriously the political tenets of Sikhi around equality and social justice.

Disrupting Islamophobia

Islamophobia in the Sikh diaspora can be described as hegemonic (Sian 2013: 50, 121). What Sian refers to as "Sikh Islamophobia" has its roots in two major periods of Sikh-Muslim antagonism including, firstly, Mughal confrontation with early Sikhism in fifteenth-century India, and secondly, violence associated with the Partition of India in 1947 and British colonial divisions of peoples (Sian 2013: 77, 102). Both of these events are narrated through the lens of good (Sikh) versus evil (Muslim). Under Mughal reign those Sikhs (including Gurus) who sought to resist Mughal power and conversion to Islam were subjected to torture and violence. As a result, much of the Sikh literature arising out of the eighteenth century produced a clear Islamophobic theme, whereby Mughals were conflated with Muslims and depicted as corrupt and treacherous, whilst Sikh bravery was emphasized.[40]

In the communal violence that accompanied the division of Punjab in 1947, hostilities between Sikhs and Muslims were reinforced, as Muslim leaders opted for inclusion in Pakistan and Sikh leaders opted for inclusion in India (Sian 2013: 33). In Sikh narratives on partition, Muslims are once again read as the sole enemy and commonly depicted as being on a rampage to convert and rape Sikh women.[41] What is problematic is that in much Sikh discourse, the violence during partition is rarely read as belonging to a larger canvas, whereby Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were all subject to brutality at each other's hands, and the outbreak of such violence was made possible by the breakdown of law and order, and ethnic cleansing, to realign populations along the new international frontiers created by the British (Sian 2013: 120). Rather, the meaning attached to these episodes of violence centers upon ideas that Muslims were targeting only Sikh female bodies; in that sense, Muslims were once more seen to be threatening the very existence of Sikhs.[42]

This language of threat has been adopted in the contemporary diasporic context whereby hegemonic Sikh discourse has claimed that young Sikh females have become the particular targets for Muslim "predatory" behavior (Sian 2013: 65). The "forced" conversions narrative has been embedded within the British Sikh community since the 1980s (Sian 2013: 39 and 81). This is an Islamophobic tale, which describes the threat of Muslim "predators" lurking on university campuses, supposedly ready to lure "vulnerable" Sikh girls into the folds of Islam through disguise and manipulation. Sikh female voices are rarely central in these narratives, which not only works to situate them as "passive" South Asian women, but also locates them as bodies that require policing by Sikh males (Sian 2013: 67). The preoccupation with Muslim "predators" thus acts as a vehicle to entrench both patriarchal norms and Islamophobic values within the Sikh community.

The global "war on terror" has also contributed to increasing Sikh Islamophobia, which parallels the heightening of a global Islamophobia. On the ground, this meant that there was a marked increase in hate crimes against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim.[43] In this climate, many Sikhs are often confused with or mistaken for being Muslims.[44] Following 9/11, for example, the first person to be killed in a hate crime was a Sikh man in Arizona, and after 7/7, a number of attacks on Gurdwaras and violent assaults on people from the Sikh community

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were reported. The year 2012 also saw the tragic shooting of Sikhs praying in a Gurdwara in Wisconsin. The "war on terror" therefore created conditions in which Islamophobia flourished, and the Sikh community was not immune to this development, but they were also in a complicated relationship as both consumers of Islamophobia (which would seem to confirm their negative image of the Muslim community) and as victims of Islamophobia, since many Islamophobes cannot tell the difference between a Sikh or a Muslim (Sian 2010: 251-55). Remarkably, the Sikh community initially failed to find common cause with Muslims, with the famous slogan: "we are Sikh, not Muslim." Further, outward gestures of candlelight vigils and the draping of the USA flag on Gurdwaras following 9/11 served as an active display by some Sikhs to demonstrate their "model minority" status and "compatibility" with the west.[45]

In order to decolonize both Sikh Studies and Sikhness itself, we must actively reject and challenge Islamophobic representations in organizational, community, and academic discourse. Considering their shared history and present encounters with colonial whiteness, a key way of undermining toxic Islamophobia is through the development of political mobilizations and solidarities with Muslims; this is perhaps more urgent a task in light of the "war on terror" that has facilitated the growth of racial hatred directed towards all those marked as brown.[46] Furthermore, we call for the replacement of a Muslim antagonist with an antagonism directed towards structures of racial, gendered, and colonial oppression. This opens up the possibility for Sikhs to narrate themselves in a way that complements Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji's message of fighting injustice and *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*'s teachings from the Islamic humanist-mystic tradition of Sufism. Such a vision of Sikhness is anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and non-dependant upon the logics of Islamophobia.

Recognizing/Undoing the Role of Diaspora in Settler Colonialisms

For the Sikh diaspora and indeed all diasporas who have settled on Indigenous lands, we advocate active refusal of colonial state sovereignty, whether that be Canadian, Australian, American, Israeli, or Indian dispossession of Indigenous peoples. With the exception of some scholarship,[47] little attention has been paid to relations between South Asian diasporas/arrivants and Indigenous peoples in settler nations like Canada, or Sikhs and Indigenous peoples in India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. Many Dalits and Indigenous peoples who are practicing Sikhs face caste discrimination from other Sikhs and also ongoing state-led and corporate colonial dispossession.[48] Some Sikhs do attempt to challenge such dispossession. However, these are exceptions, which we contend need to be centered in Sikh feminist decolonial projects.

In the contemporary era, Sikhs must consider our ongoing participation and complicity in Indigenous dispossession and settler sovereignty, whether it is intentional or not. All non-Indigenous people in Canada, the US, and Australia are benefiting from the fact that we were not subject to tactics of genocide such as state-sanctioned and church-run residential schools (Sehdev 2011: 265), which aimed to eradicate Indigenous systems and indoctrinate children into Euro-Canadian and Christian ways. Moreover, when members of the Sikh diaspora make claims to the State for further inclusion and multiculturalism—such as the right to wear turbans or carry kirpans in public spaces—we are assuming the legitimacy of the State to grant our claims, even though the sovereignty of the State is directly contested by multiple Indigenous nations in Canada, the US, and Australia. When we build our Gurdwaras and Sikh schools on native land, we are naturalizing our property rights to settle on land that is unceded or ruled by disregarded treaty rights. While some Sikhs own businesses and homes, we have rarely done so by learning about and enacting our treaty obligations to Indigenous peoples and nations whose land we now settle. When we tell our stories of pain and tragedy, such as the 2012 mass shooting by an American white supremacist in the Gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, which killed six and

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wounded four others, we are not, in general, making links to the killings of Indigenous (or Black) people. When we celebrate Sikh successes in the academy, we tend not to question how the college/university is complicit in settler colonialism by the very fact that it is built on Indigenous land by displacing Indigenous nations.

Our manifesto does not presume that the nation-state and nationalism are intrinsically liberatory or intrinsically oppressive. On the one hand, masculinist and heteropatriarchal models of nationalism that adversely impact Indigenous peoples, cis-women, queer, trans, and two-spirit peoples should be refused; this includes nationalist scripts of South Asian queerness-as-exceptionalism, where the queer diasporic model minoritized subject is used in the service of bolstering homonationalism, namely a process by which those with ruling authorities (e.g., governments) align with claims of the LGBT community in order to justify racist nationalist positions and discourses of western superiority, especially against Islam (Puar 2008). On the other hand, following Indigenous feminist theories, models of governance and community on which settler nation-states (like Canada, US, and Australia) are founded should not be relied upon as sites of social change; instead, forms of nationhood that are predicated on interrelatedness, care, and responsibility are preferable over forms of nationhood based on coercion and control over territory and populations.[49]

To challenge the legitimacy of state sovereignty or the naturalization of settlement and private property and to build good relations between Sikh diasporas and Indigenous peoples in the west does not negate the oppression and racism faced by Sikhs today. But this is not an "oppression Olympics" where groups compete for the mantle of the most oppressed; victimhood competitions serve only white supremacy. Instead, it is important for us to note that Sikhs can be both subject to penalty by mainstream society and also be ranked as relatively preferable by the same society as settlers structurally implicated in consolidating colonial rule, white sovereignty, and nation-state dominion over Indigenous peoples. Indeed a critical stance on state formation in settler nations could be linked to settler formation in historical and contemporary India, whereby the oppressive structures of the state and of hegemonic nation-building adversely shape Indigenous peoples' rights.

Fostering Care and Responsibility for the Nonhuman World

Finally, we believe that Sikh Studies should break with the modern colonial binary of human/nonhuman, in order to more centrally address human care and responsibility for the non-human world. This includes nonhuman animals, plant life, biodiversity, water, air, land, and natural inanimate objects. Sikhi, after all, is based on a deep reverence for all creation. Notably, the sacred vision for the environment was composed by Guru Nanak Dev Ji who lived in Punjab, the land of five rivers. Guru Ji stated, "*Pavan Guru Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat*," meaning that "Air is the Guru, Water the Father, and the Earth is the Great Mother."[50] Khalsa takes this to also mean that Sikh feminisms encompass honoring all life as an interconnected ecosystem in balance (Khalsa 2015: 245), whereby the notion of sovereignty is predicated on mutual care and *seva* for the other, oneself, and ecology. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* also outlines that *"Asmaan jimee darkhat aab paidaa-is khudaa-ay"* (The sky, the earth, the trees, and the water—all are the Creation of the Lord). Indeed, our understanding of Sikhi is that it is rooted in discipline over the self, not mastery over nature.

Food produced through cruelty is not consistent with Sikhi or our approach to the living world. As the US-based group EcoSikhs states,

> The Guru (Granth Sahib) cares for, nurtures, and resides within nature, and expects us to be more caring about our climate in every aspect of our lives […] The Sikh scripture

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> declares that the purpose of human beings is to achieve a blissful state and be in harmony with the earth and all creation […] Environmental concerns may be viewed as part of the broader issue of human development and social justice. Many environmental problems, in both developed and developing nations have the greatest impact on the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalized populations. Therefore an integrated approach is necessary. (EcoSikhs 2014: n.p.)

Indeed, issues of poverty face Sikh farmers in India, and marginalized farmers all over the world are threatened by extreme droughts, floods, and wildfires. EcoSikhs models for us the kind of integrated commitment to environmentalism and social issues that is important to our political manifesto.

4 Conclusion

This paper builds upon the growing literature on decolonial, postcolonial, and anti-colonial approaches to unsettle both identities and disciplinary preoccupations. The manifesto articulated throughout this paper has sought to critically reflect upon what a decolonial Sikh Studies may look like, why it is necessary, and the epistemological and empirical concerns attached to such a project. Overall, our campaign for decolonial Sikh Studies is driven by the need for political action. In this conclusion we sketch the ethos of such political action.

First, taking political action is consistent with Sikhi, which obliges Sikhs to fight against tyranny,[51] reflected in the teachings of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji (1621-1675), the ninth Guru, against persecution, and Guru Gobind Singh Ji's commitment to the Khalsa as an armed body of revolutionaries.[52] While Sikh Gurus are predominately cited as warriors of justice, Sikh women have been active as well. Today, for instance, turbaned Sikh women consider the wearing of the turban to be a postcolonial, feminist choice.[53] Historically, Sikh involvement in anticolonial struggles against British rule in India and against other colonizers in South Africa, Canada, Britain, Hong Kong, and the US has been instrumental in the revolutionary religious and secular components of the Ghadar movement,[54] as well as labor migration action, global anticolonialism, and local antiracism.[55] In this sense, our manifesto is inspired by the history of *collective organizing across social, economic, and political issues*. We advocate that this kind of struggle for justice occur among Sikhs at a much larger scale.

Second, our manifesto draws inspiration from the need to fight for the freedom and rights of *all* people, what is referred to as *sarbat da bhala* (for everyone's benefit). Sikhs have mobilized to take action in solidarity with Palestinians and Jews killed as a result of state-sanctioned apartheid in Israel; they have actively challenged the 1984 genocide in India and its impact on widows and children[56]; they have protested against the treatment of Muslims by the Hindutva Indian Government of Modi; and some have stood up against police brutality against Black people and Indigenous peoples in Anglo-American contexts. Our manifesto is inspired by the history and contemporary collective organizing for social, economic, and political change by Sikhs, Indigenous peoples, Black peoples, and other communities of color; and it also advances a *politic of relational activism* in which Sikh struggles for justice are inseparable from the struggles of other communities facing oppression. Decolonial Sikh Studies must engage closely with local and global social movements to understand the rich linkages, continuities, and diverse trajectories that the struggle entails; in other words, we have to be willing to stand together "with our combined spirits, our collective intellects, and our many bodies" (Davis 2016: 45).[57]

Third, our manifesto is a call to develop *community-wide conversations to elaborate Sikhness in its own terms and Sikh identities as political formations-in-the-re/making*, rather than internalizing a

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hegemonic western framing in which Sikh subjectivity is always on the periphery (Sian 2013: 113). Fourth, action need not be limited to achieving formal inclusion, equality, or civil rights. While these norms are not precluded in projects of social transformation, neither do we assume that they are ideal or the primary goals. Indeed, state-assigned rights and inclusion can merely consolidate hierarchies.[58] Moreover, practices of inclusion can be deployed to co-opt more radical agendas for social change and domesticate them. As an alternative, our manifesto is propelled by a politics of disruption—*disruption of calcified relations of control and rule,* wherever they are, including in marginalized spaces. To disrupt is to call into question what is entrenched, naturalized, authorized, taken as given, and assigned legitimacy.[59] The praxis of disruption fosters decolonial possibilities of generating non-state-based subject formations and relations.

Ultimately our vision, as set out in this manifesto, takes seriously the experiences of marginalized Sikhs and emphasizes the importance of forging broader global connections and alliances with other groups facing oppression—this, to us, is a way of living the Sikhi teaching of *Ek Onkar* (Oneness with Everything). This is both a scholarly and an activist contribution. By combining the theoretical with the practical we see the potential for decolonial Sikh Studies to provide a critical, ethical, and politically conscious space that is inclusive and embracing of all Sikhs and subaltern groups. By stepping outside of a western gaze, decolonial Sikh Studies is not bound to essentialist, homogenizing discourses, but rather is a mode of thinking and of being in its own right that is able to actively construct its own past, present, and future.

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